

The Sikh Struggle In the 18th Century and Its Relevance for Today

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The Sikhs have been much in the news during recent years and many people have been asking basic questions about them. Who are the Sikhs? Was not Sikhism founded by Guru Nānak who preached a combination of Hinduism and Islam, choosing the best of each and rejecting the remainder? When did they emerge as a people believing a distinctive faith? Are they not really Hindus of a particularly militant variety?

The questions “Was Guru Nānak the founder of Sikhism?” and “Is Sikhism a variety of Hinduism?” are misleading because the answers have to be both yes and no. Unquestionably, when Sikhs trace the foundation of Sikhism the line of descent stops at Guru Nānak (1469–1539), yet Nanak’s doctrine was the *nām simaraṇ* (meditation on the divine name) of the Saints. The Saint tradition of northern India developed among people who were predominantly Hindu with the contribution of Islam only marginal in importance. Since then the faith that today is called Sikhism has evolved in response to the pressure of ever-changing historical circumstances. Sikhs of the Khalsa today quite properly regard the dominant version of their faith as distinct from that of every variety of Hindu.

The pressure of historical circumstances began to produce significant changes in the time of the sixth guru, Hargobind (1595–1644), and these changes became particularly marked under the tenth guru, Gobind Singh (1666–1708). It was Guru Gobind Singh who established the Khalsa as an order to which all dedicated Sikhs were expected to

belong. This order was probably founded in 1699, and all its members were expected to adhere to a formal discipline of belief and behavior, its prominent features being uncut hair and the carrying of arms. The political threat was now becoming serious. The Sikhs, organized into a tiny state on the edge of the Shivalik Hills, were increasingly threatened by surrounding hill chieftains and by the power of the Mughal empire on the plains. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the battles began that, during the next hundred years, were to transform the Panth (the Sikh community).

It is this century that constitutes the heroic period of Sikh tradition. Gopal Singh, a modern Sikh writer, describes the career and legacy of Guru Gobind Singh in the following terms:

Thus ended, at the young age of 42, an amazing character in the history of the human race. Assuming secular and spiritual responsibilities for not only his immediate followers, but for human freedom in this subcontinent, for man's dignity and his right to his personal beliefs and ways of life, at the tender age of 9, fatherless, surrounded by jealous and intriguing members of his ancestral family, by the hill chiefs around, and above all, the Moghal emperor and his viceroys, he gave a new secular hope and spiritual dynamism to a whole people. He moulded out of sheer clay men and women of steel, sparrows who could pounce upon the hawks and tear them open. Only three years after his death, the Sikhs under Banda were the masters of a large portion of territory in central and south-east Panjab and were threatening Delhi. Thirty years after, they were the masters of the Cis-Satluj states, and a major power in the territories lying between the Ganga and the Yamuna, after a life-and-death struggle which, in its heroism and sacrifice, has few parallels in the history of mankind.

The Guru had made death for a cause so popular that even when [a] price was put on the head of every Sikh, and the whole community was hounded out of its habitations and lived for years in the woods and hideout, not one surrendered or accepted defeat. By the end of the century, they had established their rule over the entire Panjab, and later also in Kashmir, Ladakh and the Pathanland right up to the Khyber pass. For the first time in a thousand years of India's history, the tide of invasions had turned westwards. This was nothing short of a miracle.¹

These are enthusiastic words, rather different from the kind of cautious qualified estimate one might expect from an academic historian. This is precisely why they have been chosen. Here our concern is not with the doubting queries and cautious judgments of academic historians. Our subject is history as it is popularly understood, not as it actually happened. To some extent we are indeed the products of the

¹ Gopal Singh, *A History of the Sikh People, 1469–1978* (New Delhi: World Sikh University Press, 1979), p. 326.

history that actually happened and for this reason we need the kind of research that will uncover that history. At the same time we are also the products of a dominant interpretation of that history, of the received tradition that selects and presents such aspects of the past as match the needs of our present circumstances and nourish the aspirations that we project into the future.

It should require little thought to appreciate the relevance of this issue to present circumstances or those of the recent past. No human situation can be adequately understood without reference to the history that created it, and that same history is commonly invoked as a means of defining a situation or of justifying proposed remedies. But which history do we need to know? Is it the history that actually happened, or should we be concentrating our attention on the history that is popularly believed to have happened? The obvious answer is that we should be concerned with both. The *useful* answer is that for any issue concerning present circumstances or future policies it is the latter that deserves our closer attention.

Because we are talking about two different perceptions of history, confusion can easily arise if we persist in using the same word to cover both varieties. If we reserve "history" for what actually happened we are left with the need to find a term that will cover what is believed to have happened. There are two words that may appropriately be used to designate the popular version of history as opposed to the strictly academic or scholarly version. For general purposes the word "tradition" is here preferred and is sometimes used. If, however, we are to engage in a close analysis of popular history there is a better term, and that is the word "myth."

There are, of course, some obvious objections that will be raised as soon as the word "myth" is introduced. Two of these deserve to be noted before we proceed. We should first acknowledge that the word has been variously used by different disciplines and individuals, and that if it is to be effectively deployed a brief definition is necessary. It should also be remembered that in popular parlance "myth" is typically accepted as a synonym for "legend." For this reason its usage can easily suggest that we speak of something that is not true. As the word is used here it is certainly not a synonym for "legend," nor does it necessarily imply untruth. A definition is obviously required.

The definition that is here offered is essentially the same as one I stated at greater length when venturing upon a study of the hagiographic narratives of the life of Guru Nānak (the *janam-sākhīs*).² We

² W. H. McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the janam-sākhīs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), chap. 2.

begin by contrasting that which happened (which we shall bravely call “fact”) with that which did not happen (which we shall call “legend”). The word “myth” corresponds to neither of these. Typically, it utilizes both fact and legend (or nonfact) in order to construct a particular interpretation of what took place. It may actually use nothing but fact and yet qualify as myth. Similarly its content may consist exclusively of legend. The essential point is that regardless of its sources it produces a coherent statement that amounts to an interpretation of the past. To this we should also add that in order to be effective it must be believable. We should also recognize that there is seldom anything sinister or contrived in the making and subsequent molding of myths. It is a perfectly natural process, one that all cultures perform.

For present purposes this means that we are not speaking about the “history” of the Sikh people during the eighteenth century but, rather, about the Sikh “myth” of the eighteenth century. To be more specific, we can call it the myth of the rise and ultimate destiny of the Khalsa. As we have already noted the Khalsa was the order instituted by Guru Gobind Singh on the threshold of the eighteenth century, complete with ritual initiation (*amrit sanskār*) and a formal code of discipline (*rahit*).³ The task of unraveling just how the Khalsa did, in fact, develop is an exceedingly complex one, and much remains to be done in this regard. The myth, however, is writ large and clear on each succeeding generation, and emphatically that applies to Sikh society today.

This myth is one that bears a close relationship to recent events and to claims that have been greatly strengthened by those events. For an understanding of the present situation in the Punjab it is not sufficient to focus our attention on such incidents as the Indian Army invasion of the Golden Temple complex in 1984 or the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi later in the same year. We need more than a narrative of these recent events, regardless of how accurate or detailed the account might be. We also require more than the kind of analysis that concentrates exclusively on political developments of the recent past. This too is both essential and insufficient. What we must also understand is the perception of Sikh history (the tradition or the myth) that lies behind current claims to justice and to the due recognition of distinctive Sikh rights.

Like all Sikh tradition the myth of the Khalsa is communicated to succeeding generations of Sikhs in a variety of ways. Those of us who spend much of our lives reading words on paper (or screens) are inclined to assume that the effective means will be literature, ranging from simple stories written for children to mature presentations

³ W. H. McLeod, *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 34–37, 83–86.

intended for educated adults. The written word is certainly one of such means and its influence continues to grow. Some of its results are printed in English, many more in Punjabi. For the purposes of this essay we shall necessarily rely on this particular source and specifically on the English variety. In so doing we should remember that the Punjabi material is much more extensive, its idiom much more fluent, and its imagery much more colorful. As such it is vastly more influential.⁴

We should also remember that for all its influence the impact of popular literature is still secondary. The principal mediator of myth or tradition remains oral communication. This includes the telling of stories from Sikh history in Punjabi homes. It also includes the preaching regularly delivered in *gurduārās* (Sikh temples) and at the well-attended gatherings held to mark high points in the Sikh calendar. The stories told in homes and *gurduārās* are repeatedly reinforced by references and allusions occurring in conversation and in public addresses, the latter including the political speeches given with such frequency and vigor in the Punjab. Lest we are tempted to assume that political speeches supply the principal link between the myth and its contemporary application, let it be emphasized that the politicians speak to what is already firmly lodged in the minds and understanding of their listeners. Popular leaders certainly utilize and reinforce the tradition, but they do not create it, nor do they act as primary communicators of it.

The role of the *gurduārā* includes homilies (*kathā*), which repeatedly invoke Sikh tradition. It also includes the regular recitation of *Ardās*, the so-called Sikh Prayer. *Ardās* is recited in unison at the conclusion of most Sikh rituals (including routine services of worship), and for this reason we can assume that its words are firmly implanted in the minds and memories of a substantial proportion of Sikhs. The prayer consists of three parts and of these the second portion calls to remembrance the past trials and triumphs of the Panth.⁵ Its list includes the following: "Those loyal members of the Khalsa who gave their heads for their faith; who were hacked limb from limb, scalped, broken on the wheel, or sawn asunder; who sacrificed their lives for the protection of hallowed gurdwaras, never forsaking their faith; and who were steadfast in their loyalty to the uncut hair of the true Sikh: reflect on their merits, O Khalsa, and call on God, saying, Vāhiguru!"⁶

⁴ These range from the numerous works of Satibir Singh on the individual gurus, through Baba Prem Singh Hoti Mardan's *Khālsā rāj de usaraie* (Ludhiana: Lahore Book Shop, ca. 1942), to all manner of popular presentation.

⁵ Teja Singh, *Sikhism: Its Ideals and Institutions* (Calcutta: Orient Longmans, 1951), pp. 120–33. McLeod, *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism*, pp. 103–5.

⁶ McLeod, *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism*, p. 104. *Vāhigurū* literally means "praise to the guru" but nowadays is usually translated as "wonderful Lord." Originally an ascription of praise, *Vāhigurū* is now used as a name for Akal Purakh or God.

Popular art also serves to communicate and reinforce the same myth, and one variety has a considerable impact in this regard. This form is not the movie film, regardless of the current popularity of that particular medium in India. There is a traditional embargo on the dramatic representation of the lives of the gurus, and to a considerable extent this carries over to the postguru traditions. The influential form is the colorful variety of picture variously known as calendar art or as the bazaar poster.

To European tastes these prints, with their uninhibited use of the primary colors, appear garish in the extreme and the evident naïveté of many such pictures can seem positively embarrassing. If we avert our gaze we miss an important point. Bazaar posters are enormously popular and as such they are bound to exercise a notable influence in molding and sustaining the tradition. Although no one can accurately measure the relative popularity of individual prints the prime contender for the first place is probably a gruesome picture of the decapitated eighteenth-century warrior Baba Dip Singh. We shall return to Dip Singh later.⁷

If we move from bazaar posters to “respectable” art we shall find the same themes represented with a somewhat greater subtlety of color and line but little difference in terms of directness. This is particularly true of the influential work of Kirpal Singh, much of which was destroyed during the army assault on the Golden Temple complex. Kirpal Singh has concentrated his efforts on the more stirring episodes from Sikh tradition and several of his canvases were hung in the Sikh Museum attached to the Golden Temple. I well remember watching a group of village people standing spellbound before one of his more gory compositions.

My own awareness of the influence of tradition was also strengthened by student responses during the period I spent teaching Punjab history to Punjabi students. There was never any need for me to complete any of the popular jingles that tradition associates with the eighteenth-century Panth. I merely had to start one, and the students would take it up and carry it through to its conclusion.⁸ The problem was that I believed my duty to be the inculcating of history as it actually happened. Against a firmly embedded pattern of traditional understanding the task proved to be a forbidding one. What I soon discovered was that the myth of the Khalsa was an inheritance that all my Sikh students had long since received and interiorized, a condition that ensured that my well-intentioned efforts met with very limited success. It was perhaps fortunate that I failed. Success on my part would presumably have ensured

⁷ For a detailed description of the nature and range of bazaar posters, see W. H. McLeod, *Popular Sikh Art* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991). A reproduction of the Dip Singh print appears in this work.

⁸ A famous example concerns Mir Manu, the hostile governor of the Punjab in the mid-eighteenth century. G. S. Chhabra gives its text in Punjabi in *Advanced History of the Punjab*, rev. ed. (Jullundur City: New Academic Publishing, 1968), 1:396. For the text in roman, together with translation, see G. Singh, p. 391.

failure in the students' final examination, for the external examiners doubtless shared their perception of eighteenth-century Sikh history.

In case that personal aside should restore the notion that my use of the term "myth" does, after all, mean something altogether different from historical truth let me repeat that the word is not to be set in opposition to such terms as "fact" or "accuracy." Myth, as I understand and use the word, means interpretation and is order to be credible as an interpretation it must draw extensively from credible sources. In practice this will mean that much of its material is indeed factual. It is to be understood neither as a synonym for fact nor as a denial of that which is factual. What it typically supplies is a combination of fact and traditional belief, selective in terms of specific content and heavily glossed in order to reinforce its distinctive interpretation.

According to this perception of Sikh history the rise of the Khalsa can be conveniently divided into six phases. The first is the period that foreshadows the actual emergence of the Khalsa. This phase begins with the death of the fifth guru, an event that occurred in 1606. Arjan, the fifth guru, died while in Mughal custody and his death is traditionally viewed as martyrdom. Prior to his imprisonment he is believed to have commanded his son and successor, Hargobind, to sit fully armed on his throne;⁹ and Guru Hargobind is believed to have responded by donning two swords. One sword represented the continuing spiritual authority of the guru (*pīrī*) while the other signified a newly assumed temporal role (*mīrī*).¹⁰ The tradition may or may not be accurate. The essential point is that it is firmly believed to be accurate and that it legitimizes developments that were subsequently to occur within the Panth.

The second phase covers the eventful career of Gobind Singh, guru from 1675 until 1708 and last in the line of personal gurus. In his case also, accession to the office of guru followed the execution (and thus the martyrdom) of his father. Threatened by neighboring states in the Shivalik Hills the young guru fought a number of battles, and these encounters also occupy an important place in the developing tradition of militancy. The critical event, however, was to be the founding of the Khalsa order in 1699.¹¹

This crucial act on the part of the tenth guru is variously interpreted by Sikh tradition. One view perceives it as a decision designed to turn sparrows into hawks, to convert a meek following into one that would defend itself against the growing threat of attack. Another stresses the

⁹ M. A. Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909), 3:99.

¹⁰ Teja Singh and Ganda Singh, *A Short History of the Sikhs* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1950), p. 38; Chhabra, p. 200.

¹¹ For a cautiously reliable account of the founding of the Khalsa, see J. S. Grewal and S. S. Bal, *Guru Gobind Singh* (Chandigarh: Panjab University, 1967), chap. 6 and app. C, pp. 103–26, 182–89.

need to ensure that Sikhs who shrank from recognition during the execution of the ninth guru should never again be permitted to conceal their identity, an identity that would thereafter be proclaimed by the highly visible marks of Khalsa membership (notably the uncut hair). A more modern interpretation directs attention to the quest for justice rather than to the need for defense. All three are mutually compatible, and all three agree that 1699 marks the high point of Sikh history. All agree that the guru's intention was to imbue his followers with the spirit of steel and that if need should thereafter arise the Sikhs must be prepared to fight.¹²

Immediately after the founding of the Khalsa the heroic century began with warfare that conspicuously involved the Mughal authorities of Sirhind. A lengthy siege was followed by the evacuation of the guru's stronghold of Anandpur in 1704 and by his move to a remote area of southern Punjab. Tradition acknowledges that the guru suffered considerable losses during the period, but it does not accept any suggestion of defeat. Instead it emphasizes the loyalty, heroism, and endurance of his followers and the supreme example set by the warrior guru himself. What the rest of the world might well regard as a disaster is transformed into a pattern of strategic withdrawal leading to ultimate victory. The setbacks are, however, acknowledged as such, and in so doing tradition evokes the treachery and cruelty of those who opposed the guru.

The third phase follows the death of Guru Gobind Singh and concerns the uprising under his military successor Banda, finally ending with Banda's execution by the Mughals in 1716. At this point the tradition falters. Banda is a mighty hero, one who fought bravely in obedience to his deceased master's command and eventually suffered the cruel death of a true martyr. There is, however, a distinct hint of ambivalence as far as Banda is concerned, for there are features of his personal belief and life-style that have not been fully assimilated by the myth. During his brief ascendancy within the Panth there evidently developed disputes concerning the true nature of the Khalsa, with Banda adopting attitudes that conflict with the orthodox view of the Khalsa.¹³ Although he retains an honored place in the role of martyred heroes he remains something of a problem.

¹² This and the succeeding episodes can be found in each of the general histories chosen for examination in this account, namely, Singh and Singh; Chhabra; and G. Singh (n. 1 above).

¹³ G. Singh acknowledges these attitudes as follows: "However, it must be conceded that something did happen somewhere which must have irked the devout Sikhs of the Guru like, for instance, his innovation of a new war-slogan, '*Fateh Darshan*.'" This, however, is followed by the assurance: "And yet, when all is said, the same Sikh chroniclers credit him, to the end, with the forbearance, the patience and the religious zeal of a true Sikh and even with the miraculous powers bestowed upon him, according to them, by Guru Gobind Singh" (pp. 355, 356).

With the execution of Banda and the beginning of the fourth phase all trace of ambivalence disappears. This is the period of persecution, the final years of Mughal strength and a time of great hardship and suffering for those who were prepared to stand forth as Sikhs of the Khalsa. Tradition represents it as the period when a determined effort was made to exterminate the Sikhs once and for all. The rapid disintegration of Mughal power did not end this phase, for the Mughals were followed as persecutors by the servants of the Afghan ruler Ahmad Shah Abdali. Ahmad Shah Abdali led a series of invasions beginning in 1747, and the Sikhs were to be numbered among his targets. It was a futile campaign. By the time Abdali died in 1772 the Sikhs were well into the fifth phase, the period that was to witness the triumph of Sikh arms in the Punjab.

Throughout the course of the persecution phase the Sikhs (or such of them as were prepared to display their identity) were subjected to all manner of harassment, torture, and violent death. This treatment they steadfastly endured, spending much of their time in jungles and sandy wastes where pursuit was difficult. There they developed new patterns of warfare, a guerilla style of fighting that was to serve first as a protection and then as an increasingly successful means of offense. Groups of armed warriors were formed (*jathās*), and these were loosely organized as armies (*dals*). The emphasis, however, was on mobility, and this strategy, combined with the daring bravery of those who adopted it, carried the Khalsa into its period of triumph.

The fifth phase or period of triumph is interpreted as a mixed blessing by the tradition. The scattered *jathās* had meanwhile been consolidated into twelve larger groups called *misals*, and it was a loose alliance of the *misals* that effectively destroyed the enemies of the Panth. Success, however, was soon followed by the problems of success, and *misal* leaders who had combined to overthrow a common enemy were now increasingly inclined to compete with each other. A period of internecine warfare seemed to be developing.

The threat of disruption within the Khalsa was averted by the military and political skills of that great hero of the Panth, Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Emerging as the youthful leader of one of the *misals* (the Shukerchakia *misal*) Ranjit Singh progressively picked off his rivals by negotiation, marriage, or force. In 1799 he secured control of Lahore, and in 1801 he was formally invested with the title of maharaja of the Punjab. The final phase, the period of unification, had reached its climax. For many this was to be the fulfillment of the ambition so dramatically expressed in the eighteenth-century Khalsa slogan *rāj karegā khālsā*, "the Khalsa shall rule." Triumphant over its enemies and united under a single leader, the Khalsa now ruled the Punjab. During the course of a single century it had resisted a powerful foe, suffered a

determined persecution, endured unnumbered cruelties, and had yet survived. It had fought bravely and with consummate skill to weaken and eventually destroy those who had once purposed the destruction of the Khalsa. Triumphant it now ruled its homeland, the Punjab, and as long as Ranjit Singh remained its leader, even mighty Britain was constrained to stay its grasping hand.

Such is the myth of the rise of the Khalsa, and let us repeat yet again that it represents neither critical history nor a collection of legends. It is an enormously powerful myth, a version of history that pits truth and justice against treachery and cruel oppression. On one side there are heroes and martyrs, on the other bigots and tyrants. Bravery contends with low cunning, steadfast loyalty with barbarism. Bestriding all is the compelling figure of Guru Gobind Singh, creator of the Khalsa and its supreme exemplar. If anyone should ever doubt the appeal still exercised by this particular man a brief survey of popular Sikh literature and popular Sikh art will soon dispel any such notion.

As noted earlier it is popular literature and art that provide the principal sources for our understanding of the myth, usefully supplemented by listening to sermons or conversation. It is important to realize that much of what claims to be scholarly is in fact popular as far as its treatment of the eighteenth century is concerned. I have already cited a passage from Gopal Singh's *A History of the Sikh People* as an example. To that can be added such works as *A Short History of the Sikhs* by Teja Singh and Ganda Singh and G. S. Chhabra's *Advanced Study in the History of the Punjab*. These we note because they are widely accepted as authoritative. Although far removed from the crude presentations of the truly popular style, they nevertheless project the same interpretation.

Indeed, we can venture even further into the realm of scholarly publication without losing sight of the myth. We can also locate it in the works of British writers whose publications extend from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth and beyond. Although one will detect in them distinct notes of caution, the earliest generation of British observers were dependent on Sikh informants for much of their information, and with good reason to be impressed by the military skills of the Sikhs, they were strongly inclined to accept the myth in general terms. Joseph Cunningham projects it clearly in *A History of the Sikhs*, thus supplying a major reason for the book's remarkably durable popularity. M. A. Macauliffe does not deal with the greater part of the eighteenth century, but his treatment of Guru Gobind Singh in *The Sikh Religion* is thoroughly in accord with the traditional interpretation.¹⁴

¹⁴ Joseph Cunningham, *A History of the Sikhs* (London: John Murray, 1849); Macauliffe, vol. 5.

In these works and their less sophisticated companions certain themes can be easily identified. Some of these themes concern particular qualities of the Sikhs, others the evil nature of their adversaries. Together they combine to produce a cluster of objectives expressing the perceived purpose for which the Khalsa was founded and the glorious climax of its eighteenth-century experience. To these themes we shall now turn, and having listed them I shall briefly note their continuing application to the twentieth-century experience of the Panth. In most instances I shall add an appropriate illustration from one of the books mentioned above or from some other relevant source.

An analysis of the Sikh role delivers at least nine major themes, the first of them being defiance. Here, as everywhere, the supreme example is Guru Gobind Singh himself, and the instance that receives particular attention is the letter entitled *Zafar-nāmā*, which he addressed to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. "This letter," comments Gopal Singh, "breathes defiance and contempt for an earthly power which is yoked to tyranny and sin, and lays down the eternal rule that he alone wins in the end whose cause is just."¹⁵

To defiance is added the sword, leading us to a second theme. Here too the prime example must be Guru Gobind Singh. *Bachitar Nāṭak*, an autobiographical work attributed to the guru, begins with a salute and an invocation to the sword.

Reverently I salute the Sword with affection and devotion.
Grant, I pray, your divine assistance that this book may be
brought to completion.
Thee I invoke, All-conquering Sword, Destroyer of evil,
Ornament of the brave.
Powerful your arm and radiant your glory, your splendour as
dazzling as the brightness of the sun.
Joy of the devout and Scourge of the wicked, Vanquisher of
sin, I seek your protection.
Hail to the world's Creator and Sustainer, my invincible
Protector the Sword!¹⁶

This, it will be noted, is no ordinary sword. The sword that Guru Gobind Singh here salutes, the sword that is similarly invoked at the beginning of *Ardās*, is Akal Purakh made manifest. It is the God of justice visibly present as a sword wielded in defense of truth and righteousness.

¹⁵ G. Singh, p. 310.

¹⁶ *Dasam Granth* (Amritsar: Bhai Javahar Singh Kirpal Singh, 1967), p. 39. Although *Bachitar Nāṭak* is traditionally attributed to Guru Gobind Singh, there is a strong case to be made for regarding it as the work of one of his followers (see Surjit Singh Hans, *A Reconstruction of Sikh History from Sikh Literature* [Jalandhar: ABS Publications, 1988], p. 229).

The second theme is not merely armed defiance. It is that the divine purpose is served by physical warfare waged on behalf of truth and justice.

The third theme follows naturally from the first two. The defiant warrior wielding the divine sword in defense of his faith is, predictably, distinguished by his conspicuous bravery. Heroism is the third theme, a quality that informs the entire narrative of the rise of the Khalsa from its first beginnings to its final triumph. A popular example is the story of how the debauched and sacrilegious Massa Ranghar met his death in 1740.

After Abdul Rehman had been killed at Amritsar, one Massa Rangar Mandy-alia was appointed as the Kotwal of the city. Massa sat inside the temple, and there, with dancing girls to pacify his passion, and wine to quench his thirst, he defiled the sanctity of the place, where scriptures used to be read and God used to be praised. The blood-curdling details of such deeds reached the Sikhs in their hide-outs, and sent thrills of horror into their nerves. The news of this also reached one Mehtab Singh, who during the days of utter persecutions, having left his village, Miran Kot, near Amritsar, had taken up a service at Bikanir. His spirit revolted within himself, and taking with him Sukha Singh of Kambho Mari, he prepared the steeds and galloped towards Amritsar.

They purchased a few bags, filled them half with stones and half with coins, and dressing as revenue collectors, presented themselves at the gate of the temple, demanding permission to enter and present the revenue to Massah. The permission was forthwith granted, and the Sikhs entering Massah's presence, made their obeisance. As Massah bent to receive the money, down came a falchion, and like a flash of lightning, Mehtab Singh severed Massa's head from his body, and the two Sikhs rode back brandishing their swords, and leaving behind a mass of terror-stricken attendants and people looking aghast.¹⁷

Mere daring, however, is insufficient. The soldiers of the eighteenth-century Khalsa were certainly brave, but their reputation relied on much more than reckless dash. There was method in their warfare, and the fighting skills of the Khalsa constitute a fourth theme. These skills include their dexterous use of the sword and other weapons, their prowess as horsemen, their bewildering mobility, and their brilliant strategy. In some situations strategy required stratagem and again the guru set an example for his Sikhs to follow. During the siege of Anandpur in 1704 his enemies promised him safe conduct if he would agree to abandon his fortress. "The Guru's mother and some Sikhs approached the Guru to accept the offer, but to demonstrate the futility of putting reliance upon the enemy's promises, the Guru sent but some bullocks loaded with rags and stones covered with golden clothes, giving out that it was the Guru's treasure and the Sikhs and he himself

¹⁷ Chhabra (n. 8 above), pp. 369–70.

were to follow it. As however, the bullocks passed through the enemy lines, they were looted out only to their disappointment."¹⁸

Quick of wit and nimble of limb his followers likewise proved to be more than a match for much larger forces. Disaster certainly befell the Khalsa during its long struggle, but invariably it was the product of treachery, overwhelming numbers, or sheer exhaustion. A single soldier of the Khalsa was *savā lakh*, the equivalent of 125,000 opponents. In this celebrated claim we perceive another distinctive feature of the tradition, namely, its use of irony and exaggeration in order to make a serious point.

To the fighting skills of the soldier were added the endurance and dogged perseverance of all who accepted the Khalsa identity. This applies to the women as well as to the men. A distinctive feature of the tradition is its frequent reference to the supportive role of Sikh women; if men were distinguished by their resilience, so too were the women. The Sikhs of the eighteenth century never gave up, and their stubborn endurance supplies a fifth theme.

Hearing that the Sikhs had renewed their rebellious activities with redoubled force, [Mir Manu] gave orders to seize them wherever they could be found, and put them to the sword without pity. About 900 of them were killed when the fortress of Ram Rauni was attacked and captured. The countryside was scoured and cartloads of them were brought to Lahore each day and hammered to death. When Sikh homes were divested of men, their women were captured along with their children, and asked to change their faith on pain of extreme torture. Their children were cut up into pieces before their eyes and they were made to wear garlands of their severed heads, but not one of these determined women either abjured her faith . . . or showed any dread of a painful and merciless death.

Hundreds were captured under the personal command of Mir Manu and put to death at the *Nakhas* (horse-market) of Lahore, known by the Sikhs as *Shahid Ganj* [the place of martyrdom]. Wells were filled with their heads. But the Khalsa took it all stoically.¹⁹

For many the price that had to be paid was death. Martyrdom thus emerges as one of the most powerful of the many intertwined themes. Two of the gurus had met martyrs' deaths during the seventeenth century, and in the eighteenth century many Sikhs were to follow their noble example. The list of names is a lengthy one,²⁰ with a select group conspicuous for the quality of their devotion and the bravery with which they embraced death. Bhai Mani Singh, brutally butchered

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 301.

¹⁹ G. Singh, p. 391.

²⁰ Lakshman Singh, *Sikh Martyrs* (Madras: Ganesh, 1923), pp. 57 ff.

limb by limb in 1738, is a famous instance.²¹ If the evidence of bazaar posters is any indication, three martyrs command a particular prominence in the modern consciousness. These are the two children of Guru Gobind Singh, bricked up alive by the governor of Sirhind, and the celebrated Dip Singh to whom I alluded earlier.

In spite of the exposure of so many Sikhs to suffering and martyrdom the tradition does not suggest that they retaliated in a similar manner. Vengeance, as we shall see, does indeed emerge as a resultant theme, but at this point it is the theme of compassionate service that I note. Regardless of their identity or allegiance, all who suffered were entitled to humane treatment. For this theme the most popular example is undoubtedly Guru Gobind Singh's servant Bhai Kanihya, a name greatly honored in Sikh tradition. During the siege of Anandpur, "a Sikh called Bhai Kanihya was reported to the Guru as ministering water to the fallen in battle, irrespective of [whether they were] friend or foe. The Guru called him to his presence and asked him why he was offering water to the enemy's wounded. Kanihya replied, 'Since you've taught me to make no distinction between man and man, I do not see amongst the wounded any but you.' The Guru was so much pleased with this reply that he blessed him with salvation."²²

Gratitude toward all who assisted the guru or his Sikhs can also be identified as a distinctive theme with a continuing influence. This particularly concerns those who might normally have been expected to support the enemies of the Khalsa, and in eighteenth-century circumstances that usually meant Muslims. A famous example that still evokes a response was the protest lodged by the Nawab of Malerkotla against the decision of the governor of Sirhind to execute the infant sons of Guru Gobind Singh. In 1710 Banda's army razed Sirhind but left Malerkotla unharmed; and during the Partition disturbances of 1947 it was again spared. It remains to this day a tiny Muslim island in Indian Punjab.²³

Gratitude is a response directed to those who assisted the Sikhs without actually being members of the Panth. It is not for the Sikhs themselves, for they only perform their duty. For them the requirement was unwavering loyalty in all circumstances, and the loyalty that every

²¹ Singh and Singh (n. 10 above), pp. 124–25; Chhabra, pp. 361–62; G. Singh (n. 1 above), pp. 368–69.

²² Ibid., p. 304.

²³ C. H. Loehlin, *The Sikhs and Their Scripture* (Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House, 1958), pp. 18–19. Other examples are provided by the Muslims who are said to have assisted Guru Gobind Singh during his retreat from Chamkaur following the evacuation of Anandpur, especially the two Pathans Nabbi Khan and Ghani Khan (Singh and Singh, p. 74).

Sikh was expected to show constitutes yet another of the tradition's major themes. It was a loyalty that every true Sikh gave to the guru. While Guru Gobind Singh lived it was bestowed on him directly, and after he had died it attached to those features of the Panth that represented his explicit command or that embodied his continuing presence. The command was that Sikhs should observe the discipline of the Khalsa (the Rahit), and a prime aspect of loyalty was thus construed as the faithful observance of its outward symbols. The continuing presence of the eternal guru was (and remains) manifest in the sacred scripture (the Guru Granth) and in the gathered community (the Guru Panth). Loyalty to the guru also meant loyalty to the word of the scripture and to the will of the Panth.

These nine themes concern the duty of the Sikh. We turn now to their enemies and begin by noting that three of the counterthemes are actually identical with prominent aspects of the Khalsa role. The Mughal and the Afghan may not be the equal of the Khalsa as soldiers, but they are neither sluggards nor craven cowards. Bravery, fighting skills, and determination are all features of the hostile attacks so persistently mounted against the Sikhs during the course of the eighteenth century. This should come as no surprise. By highlighting the strength of the enemy, the myth simultaneously throws the quality of the Sikh response into sharper relief.

There are, however, other weapons at the disposal of the enemy and an important one is treachery. This we have already illustrated in the spurious promise of safe conduct offered to Guru Gobind Singh at Anandpur. Two other famous examples are provided by the career of Guru Gobind Singh, the first of them being the betrayal of the Guru's children to the governor of Sirhind.

The Guru moved on to Jatpura, from where he was befriended by another Mohammedan, Rai Kalha, who offered his services to him unreservedly. The Guru asked him to send somebody to Sarhind to get information about the fate of his little sons. The messenger sent by Rai Kalha returned in a few days and brought the sad news that the children had been done to death. The bereaved father received the news with perfect composure. Checking his tear and turning his sorrow into strong resolve, he muttered, "No, no, my sons are not dead. They refused to barter their religion. They live for ever. It is Sarhind that shall die." Saying this, he knocked out a shrub with his arrow, and added, "The enemy shall be uprooted like this."²⁴

The second was the treacherous attack, attributed by many to Vazir Khan of Sirhind, that led eventually to the guru's death.

²⁴ Singh and Singh, p. 74.

Soon after, one night, as the Guru was retiring to his bed in his camp, a young Pathan . . . entered into his presence. The man had visited the Guru earlier also during the last few days claiming to be his devotee. As this visit was not considered unusual, no one stopped him. The Guru offered him *prasād* (sanctified food) which the rascal devoured at once. Then, as the Guru was bidding him good-bye and in the process of reclining on his bed, he plunged a dagger into the Guru's illustrious body twice. The Guru jumped from his bed with the speed of an angry lion, drew his sword and chopped off the head of the fleeing assassin.²⁵

Cruelty, vicious and unsparing, was also a part of the enemy response, a countertheme to the tradition's emphasis on the loyalty and resolute endurance of the true Khalsa Sikh. "In this campaign [of 1746, the Mughal troops under Lakhpat Rai] must have killed at least seven thousand, besides three thousand brought as prisoners to Lahore. These too were beheaded at the Nakhas, after being subjected to indignities and torture. Their heads were piled up in the form of pyramids, and their mangled bodies were interred under the walls of a mosque."²⁶

The enemies who so brutally strove to subdue the Sikhs during the eighteenth century are variously identified as Mughals and Afghans. To this extent they are perceived as distinct and different opponents. From another perspective, however, they are perceived as a single foe. Both were Muslim peoples and during the eighteenth century Muslims as such came to be regarded as the sworn enemies of the Panth. This is evident both from the eighteenth-century narratives and also from the early *rahit-nāmās* (the recorded versions of the Khalsa code of conduct).²⁷ The antipathy thus generated supplies another theme, one that has been muted in the twentieth-century presentation but which nevertheless remains a part of the tradition. Muslims are the traditional enemies of the Khalsa. It is also worth noting that the center of Muslim power was usually perceived to be Delhi and that a suspicion of power emanating from Delhi is arguably another feature of the myth.

The Panth's role is thus defined by a cluster of themes and, likewise, by the role of its enemies. From the conflict between the two there emerge some general themes, aspects of the interpretation that serve to define the nature of the struggle and the objectives to which it leads.

The first of these themes has already been noted. Because it has been unjustly attacked and viciously assaulted, the Khalsa is entitled to take revenge. Vengeance is perceived to be a legitimate response. As such it is incorporated into the tradition as a part of the justification that it

²⁵ G. Singh, p. 323.

²⁶ Singh and Singh, p. 134.

²⁷ W. H. McLeod, *The Chaupā Singh Rahit-nāmā* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1987), introduction, p. 26.

offers for the policies and actions of the eighteenth-century Khalsa. Vazir Khan, the governor of Sirhind, was to be killed and his city laid waste because he had so cruelly executed the innocent sons of the guru. Massa Ranghar was to be slain because he had willfully defiled the most sacred of all holy places. Jahan Khan was to be challenged by Baba Dip Singh because he had plundered Amritsar, demolished its temple, and filled the sacred pool with rubbish. The theme of vengeance runs through the tradition, demanding a justly punitive retaliation and unflinching sacrifice.

This, however, is only a part of the explanation. The violence required of the Khalsa during its eighteenth-century struggle depends upon much more than mere vengeance for its justification. Violence should never be capricious or unprovoked. The nature of acceptable violence is clearly indicated by two famous extracts from works attributed to Guru Gobind Singh. The first, sometimes called the Prayer of Guru Gobind Singh, occurs in a work entitled *Chaṇḍī charitra*.

Strengthen me, O Lord, that I shrink not from righteous
deeds,
That freed from the fear of my enemies I may fight with
faith and win.
The wisdom which I crave is the grace to sing your
praises.
When this life's allotted course has run may I meet my
death in battle.²⁸

The second is from *Zafar-nāmā*, the letter that the guru is believed to have addressed to Aurangzeb.

When all other methods have been explored and all other
means have been tried,
Then may the sword be drawn from the scabbard, then may
the sword be used.²⁹

The sword may be drawn only if truth and righteousness are assailed, and only as a last resort. If they are attacked, and if no other defense will serve, the sword must finally be drawn for their protection.

This definition is fundamental, yet it is not the final word as far as the tradition is concerned. From defense the myth proceeds to offense as surely as the scattered *jathās* consolidated to form the victorious *misals*. The theme that this invokes is the triumph of justice. Mere

²⁸ *Chaṇḍī charitra* 231 (*Dasam Granth* [n. 16 above], p. 99); McLeod, *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism* (n. 3 above), p. 55.

²⁹ *Dasam Granth*, p. 1390.

resistance to the tyrant is not enough. Curbing his evil power may be the objective during the early struggle, but eventually his authority must be overthrown.

This in turn leads to the ultimate theme of sovereignty. Who will rule in the tyrant's place? *Rāj karegā khālsā!* "The Khalsa shall rule!" This is the destiny of the Khalsa, fulfilled in the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh yet never laid to rest. Whenever tyrants arise, whenever injustice reigns, whenever the Panth is threatened, then must the Khalsa prepare again for struggle. The call to duty may come to any generation. The destiny is eternal.

It needs little imagination to appreciate how easily this tradition can be applied to the circumstances of the twentieth century. In some respects it has been modified and adapted. "Democracy" is a word that figures prominently in the twentieth-century version, and so too is "secular" (by which is meant equal respect for all religions). This distinctively Indian sense of the word "secular" reflects the greatly diminished emphasis on the role of Muslims as enemies. The overtone is, however, still audible, and it is now accompanied by strong antagonism toward "Hindu domination." This latter feature received encouragement a century ago during the period of the Sikh Sabha movement, finding its most famous expression in Kahn Singh Nabha's small book *Ham Hindū Nahīn* (We are not Hindus).³⁰ Whereas Kahn Singh's approach was avowedly eirenic, the theme has since acquired an increasing sharpness, and for many Sikhs it now amounts to open hostility. Specifically, it is opposition to what is perceived as the Brahman rule of New Delhi or, sometimes, the Brahman-Bania rule.

During the Singh Sabha period (extending from 1873 into the early years of the twentieth century) the myth of the eighteenth century was invoked in order to assert a clear and distinct Sikh identity.³¹ In the early 1920s it powerfully supported the Akalis in their efforts to secure control of the principal Sikh *gurduārās*, and since independence in 1947 it has similarly buttressed claims for a distinctively Sikh role in the political fortunes of the Punjab. It significantly aided the drive toward Punjabi Suba (the redrawing of the Punjab boundaries in order to create a Punjabi-speaking state) and from the successful conclusion of that campaign in 1966 it leads on to claims for a larger measure of state autonomy.

³⁰ Kahn Singh Nabha, *Ham Hindū Nahīn* (Amritsar: Khalsa Press, 1899).

³¹ Strictly speaking this was not the influence of the Singh Sabha so much as of its radical sector, the Tat Khalsa. The Tat Khalsa were concerned with the question of how Sikh identity was to be defined as opposed to Hindu or any other kind of identity. The influential Sanatan Sikhs, who opposed them within the Singh Sabha, were concerned to represent themselves as a special variety of Hindu.

During the greater part of the present century the traditional Sikh understanding of Khalsa history has remained a significant feature of the life of the Panth without seriously polarizing Punjabi society or demanding real sacrifice. There are, however, major exceptions to be noted. The Akali campaign that lasted from 1920 until 1925 significantly raised Khalsa consciousness, and Partition in 1947 produced disaster of unparalleled proportions. Each of these episodes was followed by quieter times and during the early years of independence the prospect of communal harmony in Indian Punjab seemed reasonably promising. Recent events have seriously eroded that hope. As all the world knows, troubles have returned to the Punjab. Many Sikhs believe that the Panth is under attack and that justice has been denied. In making these claims they inevitably invoke yet again the Khalsa traditions of the eighteenth century.

The attack on the Golden Temple complex in June 1984 has proved to be an event of dire significance. Together with related incidents preceding and following it, the Golden Temple assault has produced a continuing crisis, punctuated by violent acts and recurrent confrontation. Although the Sikh community is by no means united in its demands, there is certainly a widespread belief that due rights are being withheld by a government that offers the unity of India as a convenient pretext for justifying its own political interests. For those of moderate inclination the claim remains a demand for a larger state autonomy. For those of radical persuasion it now embraces the ideal of an independent Khalistan.

There are thus significant differences within the community with regard to the precise nature of the objective and the approved means of securing it. This does not mean, however, that the Khalsa tradition has lost its appeal for all but the extremist few. Such a conclusion would be a very dangerous one to draw, for it would lend support to policies that can only prolong the conflict. The tradition teaches Sikhs to be resolute, and resolute they will assuredly remain. That is one of the many reasons why the tradition must be understood if the current crisis is to be comprehended fully and speedily resolved. There are in fact as many reasons as there are themes in the tradition. Loyalty, heroism, and defiance are ideals that still survive and that still command a powerful respect. If we object that the tradition is not always faithful to the actual facts we miss the point. What counts is history as a people actually understand it, and for most Sikhs that history dwells in the present as much as in the past.